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## NOTES ON THE DANISH WEST INDIES

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The efforts put forth by the Scandinavian peoples in the line of colonization deserve something more than the perfunctory notice which has fallen to their lot. Such isolated instances of a general social movement are likely to exhibit in a clearer, because simpler, light the motives and factors which have led to more important manifestations along the same lines. And even if these miniature colonial empires do owe their foundation to a somewhat different set of causes, they are not less, but more, instructive for that very reason. It is like an experiment which proceeds by isolation of factors.

The experience of Sweden was so brief, and owed so much to the influence of the Dutch visionary, Usselincx<sup>1</sup> that it may be set aside as of slighter moment; but the colonial activity of the Danes was crowned with more enduring results and affords more material, unfortunately hard of access, for study and reflection. And under present conditions, it is of especial interest to Americans to know what value the Danes really set upon their West Indian islands, before there was any definite prospect in sight for their sale.

There was no pressing reason for Denmark's colonial activity in the tropics. No overplus of population or capital demanded new fields into which to expand; no religious or political strifes existed in the homeland, to create a body of exiles to foreign parts. Commerce was not such as to require new regions of supply and demand. The acquisition of the islands St. Thomas and St. John, and later, St. Croix, was due very largely to a desire to imitate the activi-

<sup>1</sup> Van Rees, *Staathuishoudkunde*, II, 72 ff.; the Danish authorities followed in the preparation of this paper are: Bernhard von Petersen, *En historisk Beretning om de dansk-Vestindiske Öer St. Croix, St. Thomas og St. Jan*, Kjöbenhavn, 1855; *Erindringer fra et sexaarigt Ophold paa St. Croix og Cuba*, af "Th.," Kjöbenhavn, 1866; Johan Werfel, *Efterretning om de danske-Vestindiske Öers St. Croix's, St. Thomas's og St. Jan's*, Kjöbenhavn, 1801; Georg Höst, *Efterretninger om Öen Sanct-Thomas og dens Gouverneur optegnede der paa Landet fra 1769 indtil 1776*, Kjöbenhavn, 1776; H. West, *Bidrag til Beskrivelse over St. Croix, med en kort udsigt over St. Thomas, St. Jean, Tortola, Spanishtown og Crabeiland*, Kjöbenhavn, 1793.

ties of Holland and England, and to reap, if possible, the direct and indirect results of such a policy. The movement is an artificial one, therefore, at the very outset; as far as Danish trade with the tropics was concerned, it could hope for little advance of profit under the new conditions.

St. Croix, the largest of the islands, was occupied by the Danes in 1733. Previous to this time, it had belonged to the Knights of Malta (1651-1665), from whom it had been bought by Colbert. Already it had been successively in Dutch, English, Spanish, and French hands. The Maltese Knights had suffered severely from fever, and had been frequently dependent on St. Christopher for food. Under Colbert a company, invested with the usual trade monopoly, was formed, which, however, had been compelled to turn to the king for aid; and the island had been deserted (1695) by the 147 whites and 623 slaves who had inhabited it. For thirty-eight years it was neglected and masterless.

St. Thomas, the second in size of the Danish islands, was seized in 1667 by the English and its few Dutch colonists were forced to depart. Except for the visits of pirates, the island was then deserted until 1671. In that year there was formed the *Dansk Guineisk-Vestindiske Compagni*, under whose auspices the island was at once occupied by the Danes, in spite of England's protest. This Danish company was managed by six directors, who were required to invest two thousand rigsdaler<sup>2</sup> in the enterprise; shares were sold at one hundred rigsdaler. The first governor, Jørgen Iverson, reached the island May 23, 1672. The earliest proclamation of the governor dealt, in its first articles, with religious matters. Fines were fixed for non-attendance at divine service, for Sunday labor, and the like. Strict prescriptions as to drill and use of arms in defence, follow. All persons were forbidden to leave the island, or take anything away from the island without the governor's permission. Heavy fines were to be exacted for attempts to entice away another's indentured servants—whites who had sold their liberty for passage. Negroes were not allowed to leave a plantation after dark; if a strange negro was found on a plantation at night, he was to be arrested, taken to the fort, and punished. Other injunctions calculated to insure internal

<sup>2</sup>The specie rigsdaler was worth, at the end of the seventeenth century, about \$1.02. It rose a few cents in value during the ensuing period and was worth in 1844, \$1.11.

cohesion and order, and an efficient defence, were published. All fines were payable in tobacco, the natural currency of the colony.<sup>3</sup> The necessity of defence was made apparent by the robberies of the Spanish from Porto Rico, and by the presence of French and English buccaneers on the island of Tortuga.

The familiar difficulty of tropical colonization began to make itself felt after 1679—lack of an adequate labor supply. Complaint was made to King Christian V., who promptly established slave stations on the Gold Coast, and under pressure increased the number of shareholders of the company in Copenhagen; a tax was levied on coaches, for example, when the owners could not show certificates of participation to a certain figure, in the company. Naturally enough, the import of slaves into the islands increased perceptibly and with it the prosperity of the plantations. These slaves came, however, of restless and unruly stocks, and in an exceptionally short time the Danish islanders are found to be in terror of revolts and deeds of violence. Laws were enacted which could not have been enforced, else all the slaves would have perished by the halter.

The evil, because of the essential weakness of the Danish company, was not at this time of such proportions as it later displayed. Possessing meagre capital, the company could send but one ship a year to the African coast; this vessel transported slaves to St. Thomas and then loaded with colonial wares for Denmark. For the purpose of increasing trade and also to encourage the settlement of the colony, a thirty-year treaty was concluded with the Duchy of Brandenburg, in accordance with which a company of Germans was to settle in the islands. Most of the shares, however, were in Dutch hands. The immediate result of this movement was the appearance of fifty workmen in the isles and of five ships, sailing on the company's account. This company suffered much from French pirates shortly after its erection, but made such large gains as to excite the envy of the Danes, to whom small consideration was given. Its privilege ran out in 1715 and was not renewed; members of the company who desired to stay were required to take the oath of allegiance.

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes the islands were

<sup>3</sup> By 1634 sugar had distanced tobacco, and, according to the well-known laws of money, had taken its place as currency.

fortunate enough to receive as settlers a number of Huguenot fugitives from St. Christopher; these were noted, as usual, for frugality, industry and fear of God. In general during all this period, efforts were being made to attract a larger immigration; at one time young, unmarried women were forbidden to leave the country without special permission. A number of privileges were guaranteed to settlers, including religious tolerance, freedom from taxes for eight years, grants of as much land as could be put under cultivation, needed aid in agriculture, etc. Imported and exported products were to be free of customs for eight years. The policy was liberal, and the results were good; in 1688, the island numbered ninety plantations, with 317 whites and 422 slaves. To show the polyglot nature of the population, it may be mentioned that of the white families, nineteen were Danish, sixty-three Dutch, thirty English, seventeen French, three Swedish, two German and one Portuguese. This mixed character of the population was maintained into the nineteenth century, and was plainly evident to an observer in the forties.<sup>4</sup> Many local names on the island recall to mind the varied nationality of its early settlers.

The monopolistic trading company, as time went on, did not fail to prove its kinship with its prototypes—it ran the usual course of inglorious inefficiency. In 1692, as a relief measure, the island of St. Thomas was leased to a merchant, Thormohlen by name, for ten years. The lessee was to maintain a garrison and was to have full control of all the island's affairs and income. The characteristic independence of the colonial society was here witnessed, for the colonists resolutely refused to pay taxes to Thormohlen, whose activity was not prolonged beyond the original period of lease. After the disappearance of this adventurer, the company led a humdrum existence for some years. In 1736 it was found that to keep itself above water, it had in the matter of trade consistently favored the Dutch and excluded its own countrymen. Eight Dutch ships were engaged in the trade to one Danish. A counter movement of merchants in Copenhagen succeeded in forcing an entrance into the West Indian Company and the Dutch were in turn excluded.

But the company was nearing its end. The burdens which its manipulations had laid upon the colonists were intolerable and frequent complaints were lodged with the king. The company had

<sup>4</sup> Erindringer, etc., 150.

secured a thoroughgoing monopoly of raw sugar in Denmark and, by opening a refinery there, virtually commanded the market. Prices were driven very high and sugar became a luxury no longer in common use. The shortsightedness and greed of this policy impressed themselves upon the government and in 1755 King Frederik V. bought out the company's entire plant, including the islands, the equipment and the Copenhagen refinery. The price paid (1,418,000 rigsdaler), was entirely incommensurate with the good effects that appeared at once and with the general gratitude of the oppressed colonists.

One of the chief causes of rejoicing to the planters was the removal of the restrictions laid by the company on the importation of slaves. Slaves were a necessary evil, and one with which the colonists played as with fire, with a certain fateful fascination. Early in the eighteenth century and before, precautions must constantly be taken regarding runaways, and fear of uprisings was constantly displayed. All the boats, for instance, were drawn up at night under the guns of the fort. The Spanish of Porto Rico enticed the runaways and hypocritically explained, in answer to complaint, that the slaves had come "to be baptized." The fear of the blacks had grown until the colonists had become panicky, and consequently needlessly cruel and arbitrary. In 1733 an edict appeared which evidenced this terror; such punishments as branding, loss of limbs, hanging, and breaking on the wheel were threatened for what appear to us to be comparatively unimportant offences. By this cruelty an uprising was brought about late in 1733 on the island of St. John, for the suppression of which it was found necessary to call in the French from Martinique. The desperation of the negroes is shown by the fact that they preferred death to capture; a body of three hundred, finally shut in and sure to be taken, deliberately shot each other, so that the victors found their dead bodies lying in a circle about their last camp. The suppression of this revolution cost 7,900 rigsdaler, besides costly gifts to the French officers. But the St. John planters refused to bear a share in the expense, asserting among other things, that the fort was poorly prepared for resistance.

When the king had taken over the powers of the company and slaves began to come in with greater rapidity, the native question became still more threatening. Partially in consequence of this, the

slave trade was declared illegal (1792). Thus the Danes became the forerunners of the great philanthropic movement of the early nineteenth century; the slave-trade went on, none the less, with the connivance of the authorities for half a century.<sup>5</sup> Finally, on the queen's birthday, June 28, 1847, all children born of slaves were declared to be free; the whole slave system was to be abolished in twelve years. But this move failed to win the confidence of the slaves, who were suspicious of the twelve year term. Indications of a conspiracy appeared in 1848 and an incipient and dangerous revolt in St. Croix in July of that year, encouraged by English sailors, forced an immediate emancipation; 1,892 whites were opposed to 22,000 negroes in desperate mood, who carried the English flag as a symbol of freedom.

We have here, then, with unimportant variations, the stock history of the question of tropical labor up to emancipation. The orders that followed were likewise of a familiar general type. Contracts for paid labor were to date from October 1 of each year, and would be renewed only at that time; notice of such intention was to be given in August. No discharge was to be without ground, and no strikes were to be allowed; work was to last from sunrise till sunset, as a rule, and for only five days in the week; liberal allowance of time for meals (three hours) being granted. The laborer was given a small plot of ground and was to be paid per day fifteen, ten, or five cents according as he belonged to the first, second, or third grade of workmen. Extra labor during harvest was to be paid for, and no one was to be forced to work on Saturday; a maximum wage of twenty, thirteen, or seven cents was to be paid for voluntary Saturday labor. Fines, levied in labor, for absence and tardiness, were designed to oppose the tendency to vagabondage. Women were to be excused from work for seven weeks after confinement. Other provisions dealt with the treatment of the sick and weak, and with the punishment of those who incited a stoppage of labor.

Certainly these St. Croix provisions were mild ones as they appear on the statute books. It is likely that they represent the actual treatment of the freedmen with approximate correctness. The conditions of forced labor of all kinds have been regularly harder on islands than upon the mainland, where escape was easier;

<sup>5</sup> After 1792 slaves were continually imported, and premiums were paid for strong and healthy ones. Burt, *En Stemme fra St. Croix*. Kjöbenhavn, 1852.

but, inasmuch as the position of the Danish islands favored evasion, it is likely that the planters, prizing their comparatively few laborers higher, took pains to retain them. Facts seem to bear out this hypothesis. The absence of the coolie system is scarcely remarkable, when one realizes the poverty of Denmark and the generally discouraging attitude of the British, Dutch, and Chinese governments toward this form of semi-slavery.

In spite of the laws, vagabondage, and with it, crime, increased notably, especially in the towns of St. Thomas. In the country, master and former slave often worked side by side, winning a precarious existence under a somewhat disjointed system. For a long time no indemnity to former slave-owners was granted, owing to embarrassments of the home country during the Sleswig-Holstein war.<sup>6</sup> In 1855 the working classes of St. Thomas were earning from five to twenty dollars per month. Many of them were great bunglers; few felt much obligation or displayed much fidelity to their masters. The regular results of emancipation upon the character of the negro appeared prominently. Work was felt to be lowering; the negroes held the conviction that to be a "gentleman" one must command others and exact obedience. Domestic tyranny and cruelty resulted when this wish could not be gratified otherwise. Shameless begging was preferred to labor and no attempt was made to provide for old age; alms of less than a dollar were regarded as petty, and the donor was despised. Aid was asked by able-bodied men as a matter of course. Vanity was a characteristic all too common—servants would not appear on errands until

<sup>6</sup>Under date of August 24, 1852, we have a letter of considerable interest, written by a Saint Croix planter to the Danish Parliament (John Heyliger Burt, Jr., *En Stemme fra St. Croix, Breve til den danske Rigsdag*, Kjöbenhavn, 1852). The author, after recalling the prosperity of the islands during the European wars, states that they are now struggling for existence: labor is insecure, insufficient and costly, production is declining, and prices are low. He regards the labor regulations mentioned above as wise and beneficial, but explains that the planters could not have carried out the provisions demanded of them unless the labor supply had been made steady and secure.

The main contention of the letter is that the Danish Government should not so far prove false to its honor as to refuse indemnification to slave-owners after emancipation. The planters had been to considerable expense in the erection of schools, etc., for the betterment of the negroes, and yet it was proposed by some that they should in addition bear the entire amount of the loss incident to the freeing of the slaves. Any distinction between Danish and foreign planters in the matter of indemnification, such as seems to have been proposed, was doubly dishonorable.

Other grievances of the colonies are touched upon, the letter concluding with the following paragraph: "A just indemnification, a sufficient immigration of free labor, an influential Colonialraad and a strong government are the fundamental points upon which the future well-being of the colonists rests."

time had been taken to append all the finery the person in question possessed. Marriage was most lax, among the higher as well as the lower classes, and three-quarters of the children born on the island were illegitimate. The sentiment of the Danes seems to have been decidedly against formal marriages with blacks or mulattoes.<sup>7</sup>

The government of the islands after the fall of the company appears to have been of a careful and reasonable type. Desire for an expansion of territorial possessions and a wish to aid the company had led Christian VI. to purchase St. Croix (1733) from the French. The price paid was 750,000 livres.<sup>8</sup> The miserable administration of the company on this island conspired with the rest to bring about the buying-out of the company by Frederik V. In the negro troubles that followed, the government seems to have displayed clemency and thereby to have saved itself much expense and its island citizens much loss of life and property. Complaints were not lacking, however, and the government became passive, rather than active, in later times. No successful effort was made to further education in the colonies, nor to establish adequate sea-connections. The school-fund was used up in St. Croix, and Sunday Schools, maintained by private persons, formed almost the sole educational factor in the other two islands. Postal arrangements were particularly inadequate; letters were left at the nearest store and often lay there for long periods, until the recipient happened to be apprised of their presence. Many were lost; how letters from North America, coming always via Havana, managed to reach their destination, has always remained something of a mystery to the islanders themselves.

Other details of administration were better managed. Tolls, harbor dues, etc., seem rarely to have been excessive, under the royal government. The first "colonialraad" was formed in 1852, under the governor as presiding officer. Its members were twenty in number, four from the king's selection and sixteen elective in the island. Municipal affairs were in the hands of a council of five citizens, who received no remuneration, save honor, and were not responsible to anyone. They held no open sessions, but submitted a yearly report; they were regularly selected from the best men of the island and seem to have served with fidelity and economy. The

<sup>7</sup> Erindringer, etc., p. 114 ff.

<sup>8</sup> The livre of the period was worth about nineteen and one-half cents.

governor received under the company a very small salary, but his position carried with it, of course, a number of fees and perquisites. In spite of economy, however, the royal budget of the islands shows for 1850-51 a deficit of \$48,662.

The climate of these islands is well known. Its baleful effect upon the morals, and so the health, of the Danish colonists, was pronounced. Intemperance of all kinds was prevalent, and gambling, for high stakes, aided in the general demoralization. Of the diseases noted by the Danes, malaria, yellow-fever, influenza, and small-pox were the most serious, fatalities occurring prevalently in the lower classes of the population. Tables of mortality for the years 1835-50 inclusive show an average yearly death-rate of one in twenty-six (416 in an average 11,000 population). Earthquakes are frequent, but harmless; but hurricanes are prevalent (127 in the 352 years from 1494-1846), and very destructive; the islands are in the direct track of these storms.

The trade-history of St. Thomas, which stands as a fair type for the other colonies, exhibits certain characteristics incident to its geographical location and political history. It is to be noted, first of all, that the harbor of St. Thomas formed an admirable haven, entirely adapted to the safe concealment that was so often a desideratum in the days of privateering and contraband traffic. This harbor was situated at the cross-ways of the trade-routes of that day. To these natural advantages were added the great political advantages of an almost constant neutrality and a free-haven status. The abbé Labat, writing in 1701, notices these favorable conditions, and states that the Danes derived great profits from the constant European wars, as prizes of both sides, and of free-booters, were brought here to be sold; the island also enjoyed advantages in the silver-trade with South America. St. Thomas was, in a word, a West Indian market-place of the first rank. The production of the island, with its light soil, was small, and prices were regularly high, but on the other hand, acquisition of wealth was easy and many resident foreigners had already grown rich. Though St. Thomas's harbor was declared a free haven for the first time in 1724, it had really been so for years before.

The company's baleful influence upon the island's prosperity has been noted; an indirect evil result was seen, when, at the demise of the company, Danish merchants were for some years too timid

to seize upon the palpable advantages of the trade. During 1756 not one Danish ship entered the harbor. In fact, a number of merchants left the island, and circulating currency became so scarce as to lead to an issue of paper money for which the authorities were responsible. Depopulation was so much feared that a law was published according to which anyone who left the island must surrender to the government  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent of his income and real property. In 1773 St. Thomas had 39 sugar and 43 cotton plantations. Of the 4,233 inhabitants, 265 were white, 336 colored and 1,067 slaves. St. John boasted 104 whites and 2,330 slaves. Expenses slightly exceeded income; and from 1755-92 trade amounted to little. In 1792 however, a great change occurred, coincidently with the European wars. Trade rose to unknown heights, and between 1792-1801, 1,569 foreigners naturalized in the island. A number of fugitives likewise came from San Domingo, and at the end of the century the population numbered about seven thousand. But between 1801 and 1815 the advantageous neutrality of the Danes was broken by forces they could not control. From April, 1801, to February, 1802, St. Thomas was in British hands, and though trade rose again promptly after the restitution, a second violent break came in 1807. The Danes having refused England's proffered defensive alliance, the islands were seized and held until 1815.

That the Danes valued their possessions highly in 1801 is evidenced by contemporary authority;<sup>9</sup> the feeling against England was exceedingly bitter. During the English occupation, English merchantmen alone were to be seen in the harbor and trade was very small. American products were diverted and passed over St. Bartholomew, which at this time enjoyed an ephemeral importance; St. Thomas enjoyed the direct trade of British North America alone.

After 1815 events again conspired to render St. Thomas prosperous. During the wars of emancipation of the Spanish continental colonies, many native Spaniards emigrated to the island, and the harbor was a resort of free-booters flying the flags of Buenos Ayres and Colombia. The period *circa* 1824 is regarded by some as the culminating point of St. Thomas's prosperity. But the condi-

<sup>9</sup> Werfel, as above. Oxholm (*De Danske Vertindiske Öers Tilstand i Henseende til Population, Cultur og Finance-Forfatning*, Kjöbenhavn, 1797) gives considerable detail as to the condition of the islands at the end of the eighteenth century. His book is an answer to certain "Breve fra St. Croix" containing articles upon the management of the islands.

tions which created this status were short-lived. The evil day was delayed for some years by the opportunities afforded for trade with the neighboring Porto Rico and for the financing of its early development; many sugar-raisers in Porto Rico could not have begun or prosecuted their industry without the credit afforded by St. Thomas. But, with characteristic international ingratitude, as soon as this aid was no longer indispensable, it was rudely put aside by the levying of heavy import-dues against St. Thomas, and by other means. In 1855 imports to St. Thomas (half from Europe and half from America) were valued at \$5,000,000; St. Thomas merchants still continued to finance Porto Rico to some extent, but the Danish island was evidently and surely on the decline. Denmark has been willing to part with her colonial possessions for a sufficient consideration several times since the middle of the nineteenth century; later years have witnessed no revival of trade.

This appears only natural when one reflects on the conditions which lent the former prosperity. The rise of modern transportation facilities, and the substantial peace of the world, implying as they do the passing of the narrower system of the former centuries, render a free, neutral harbor, and, indeed, a harbor of such central position as St. Thomas held, of comparatively less importance. Way-stations and concealment-stations are less in demand. Even the piercing of a waterway between the continents does not promise much for the future of these islands. As the city of small harbors has given way to the port like New York, which possesses, virtually, no harbor in the old sense of the term, so the small and local way-station has fallen away in a commerce on a grand scale in world-wide markets. St. Thomas's excellent harbor will doubtless remain a frequented coaling-station, but its former commercial importance is no more.

True colonization in the West Indies was clearly beyond the strength of Denmark, as it was beyond the strength of the Portuguese in India. The mother-country was too remote and too small, the competition of greater peoples was too strong. A decision to part with the islands would seem to be the conclusion of wisdom, and considerations of national pride alone can oppose it.

This exceptional experiment in tropical colonization by a Scandinavian people runs, therefore, through most of the characteristic phases to which the student of colonies is used. In so far, it goes

to show that the general course of events has followed the order of a natural and inevitable evolution. No particular virtue in avoiding stock errors, nor vice in committing peculiar and unusual mistakes is to be found in the Danes above other nations; economic evolution runs its course for Greek and Scythian alike, and they submit, each in his own way, to inevitable conditions and movements. In isolated cases, such as that of the Danes, though the local setting of the experiment is of curious, rather than of vital interest, essential economic and political truths are likely to emerge with especial simplicity and definiteness.